

The Origen of Universalism

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About thirty miles east of Corning, New York there is a small gray barn that sits alongside Route 86. On the side of the barn is painted in big black letters, “God is Love.” Now I don’t know for certain the faith of the person who owns that barn and to many a modern mind such a question, let alone the proclamation on the side of barn, may seem inconsequential. But in the not too distant past [the 18th century], “God is love”, was at the center of a controversial theological doctrine. Perhaps you’ve heard of it. I’m speaking of course of Universalism. The second U of our UU faith.

Now, it’s not that “God is love” was controversial to the people of that time, for it comes directly from the Christian scriptures, 1 John 4:8. This issue then, was not whether God is love or not, but rather the implications of such a statement. And in particular, how such a God could condemn any person to eternal damnation. Emerging from this question, Universalism developed and taught, in direct contrast to the prevailing orthodoxies of Calvinism, the reconciliation of all souls to God, or universal salvation, or as we read together this morning, “no one is outside the circle of love.”

A perusal of Unitarian Universalist sermons online, articles in the magazine UUWorld or books related to Unitarian Universalism, will quickly yield a collection of names of some of history’s best known Universalists, among them John Murray, founder of the first Universalist Church in America, and his wife, Judith Sargent Murray, Hosea Ballou (the “father” of Universalism in America), Benjamin Rush, Abner Kneeland (the last man to be jailed for blasphemy in the United States) Clara Barton, Olympia Brown (the first woman to be ordained by a denomination in the United States) and P.T. Barnum.

Still, while Universalism spoke to these men and women, it did not originate with them. Indeed, Universalism, at least in part, has, another older origin... Origen of Alexandria.

Probably born at Alexandria in Egypt around 184 CE, Origen of Alexandria is considered among the most brilliant, prolific writers of the early Christian church. He was a highly educated man trained in both Christian literature and Greek philosophy. Following the martyrdom of his father in 202 CE, Origen was appointed head of the catechetical school at Alexandria, a post previously held by Clement of Alexandria who apparently fled at the threat persecution. [Incidentally, some of Clement’s writings also influenced 18th century Universalists.]

Origen was what we might call today, “intense”. Unwavering in his devotion to Christianity, he lived a life of extreme asceticism. It is even claimed, that in an effort to

prevent allegations of sexual impropriety, he followed Matthew 19:12 to the letter. And if you're wondering what Matthew 19:12 says, it is this:

“For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”

Whether or not Origen actually castrated himself is unclear. Nevertheless, the point is made... Origen was all in.

Origen gained students quickly, including converts to Christianity from pagan philosophical schools. Following a trip to Rome in 211/12 AD, Origen delegated the job of teaching to a student and began to devote his time to exegesis, the critical interpretation of scripture. Later, aided by scribes Origen spent decades writing extensively including *Hexapla* [a comparison of the Hebrew bible and its earliest known Greek translation- the Septuagint], commentaries on the Bible, exegeses of scriptural texts, and his famous *Peri Archon* [*On First Principles*], considered the earliest attempt to articulate a systematic Christian theology.

Following his ordination Origen permanently relocated to Caesarea in 231 CE where enjoyed great popularity and counted the mother of the Roman emperor among his pupils. During a wave of persecutions in 249 CE Origen was imprisoned and tortured but spared execution, denying him the martyr's death he is said to have wanted. He died shortly after his release, presumably of injuries sustained during torture.

Origen might never have garnered much interest from the Universalists who we today count as our religious ancestors, except that in his writings he seemingly argued in favor of apokatastasis (the restoration of all things - or universal salvation).

This did not mean Origen was some radical outlier as we might imagine or perhaps hope. He believed in the inerrancy of the Bible, though not in the same way many present-day Fundamentalist Christians do. Rather, he felt when a literal reading defied historical or scientific fact, it was a clue that the text had a deeper meaning. To get at this deeper meaning he often employed allegory.

He upheld the already generally accepted doctrines of the Christian faith as passed down by the Apostles and believed to be confirmed in Scripture (including the oneness of God, the nature of Christ, the continuation of the soul after death).

Explaining the nature of God, Origen insisted, among other things, “...God must not be thought to be any kind of body...but is Unity, or if I may so say, Oneness throughout, and the mind and fount from which originates all intellectual existence or mind.” (Bart D.

Ehrman, After The New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity.) And he described the Trinity in hierarchical fashion as consisting of God, the Father, from which Jesus Christ [The Logos] or word was generated (not created), and the Holy Spirit, who is related to Christ as Christ is related to the Father. This conception seems to flow from his understanding of the fall humankind and his doctrine of the preexistence of souls.

Taking his cue from Genesis, Origen believed there was more than one creation event. The first was that of a group of rational beings (minds) created (but not in time) by, and existing close to, God. After tiring of this state of being and due to their free will, these rational beings fell away from God to explore other things.

Origen described this as a “cooling” of love towards God. The creation of the material world is then brought about by God to accommodate the fallen, most of whom became souls with physical bodies. Origen believed that the only rational being (mind) who remained with God after the fall was that of Christ who freely chose to remain with God in love.

Enter now apokatastasis (universal salvation). The idea that some souls would suffer eternal torment in hell was intolerable for Origen and went against all he understood about the nature of God whom he believed was the source of everything good. It is claimed Origen believed God’s love was so great that all, even Satan, would be saved, that is, restored to a pure mind state with God. And the basis for this idea? 1 Corinthians 15:28,

“When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.”

This view of salvation is understandable considering Origen’s understanding of free will and sin. Origen saw free will as the freedom to choose good and sin as separation from God, chosen out of ignorance. Therefore, he reasoned God would not punish the ignorant, but educate them.

Faith in the teachings of Christ, who took a human soul and became flesh, becomes the means by which the fallen are educated according to Origen, one by one, each according to his/her capacity and willingness within time and space until all are saved. Origen believed this could take several ages.

Once revered, Origen was later declared a heretic in part because of his teachings on the Trinity, the preexistence of souls, and universal salvation.

Universal salvation or Universalism is considered heresy by most Christian sects to this day. Yet our religious ancestors embraced it. And the influence of Origen’s thought on

the origin and development of Universalism in the late 18th and early 19th century is clearly observable in several assumptions and tenets common to it.

The first but perhaps less obvious assumption being the Bible is too important to be taken literally. Both Origen and our Universalist ancestors, like our Unitarian ancestors, applied reason in their approach to scripture. They understood the power and function of myth and that deeper meaning, even layers of meaning, often dwell below the surface or literal level.

Another, and perhaps the most obvious similarity between Origen's Universalism and that our closer religious kin, is the assertion that, "God is love." And because God is love, no one is condemned to eternal hellfire. It should be noted there were disagreements as to what that meant. Some held there would be a period of punishment for some, albeit shorter than eternity. But ultimately all would be saved, even Satan.

This was in direct contrast to Calvinism which taught that only certain human beings [the elect] were pre-selected or pre-destined to be saved and one couldn't do anything to change this. And it contrasted with the prevailing Unitarian view of the time which taught salvation by character. That is, that the path to salvation was to do good. The Universalists, on the other hand, taught salvation was not a reward for being good, but an expression of God's love. (Trudeau Universalism 101)

Indeed, they believed as Hosea Ballou (considered the father of American Universalism), said, "God saves men to purify them; that's what salvation is designed for. God does not require men to be pure in order that he may save them." The reward for doing good, according to Universalism, is happiness in this life.

For like Origen, the early Universalists in America also viewed sin as separation from God, chosen out of ignorance. And they believed Jesus was sent to re-educate or remind humanity of God's love.

Additionally Origen's theology can be read as an expression of the longing of the soul to be reunited with God even when the soul itself lacks insight into the object of its longing. Which may lend insight into an observation Hosea Ballou made about humanity's relationship to God which marks one of his most significant breaks with Christian orthodoxy. In his "*A Treatise on Atonement*", Ballou argued it is humanity that needs to be reconciled to a loving God, not an angry God to humanity.

And true to the Universalist name, Ballou contended Universal salvation is for all people, irrespective of "names, sects, denominations, people, or kingdoms." This seems to reflect sometimes overlooked language in Article 1 of the Winchester Profession, a declaration of faith Universalists ratified in 1803 in Winchester, New Hampshire, which reads,

Article I. We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.

As the Rev. Richard Trudeau notes in his book Universalism 101, the Winchester Profession states the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain “a” revelation, not “the” revelation of the character of God, etc. Indeed Trudeau has summarized historical Universalism in America, that is the second U in our UU faith, as:

God is Love

No one is condemned

The way to be happy is to do good

There are sources of religious truth outside the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Fast forward now some seventeen hundred years since Origen walked the earth and two plus centuries since the Winchester Profession was ratified and Hosea Ballou first published his “A Treatise on Atonement.” It is 2023 and much of the theological concerns Universalism sought to address are no longer a concern to most contemporary UU’s. Indeed, of all the things people of various faiths have shared with me during pastoral visits or appointments, both as a hospital chaplain and parish minister, I can count on one hand, really half a hand, the number of times a person named eternal damnation as a concern.

So is that the reason Universalism is the second and not the first U in Unitarian Universalism? No. That had to do with what it always has to do with...money and power. At the time of the merger in 1961 of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America, the Unitarians had more members and more money.

Still, there are members of historically Universalist churches who call their church and even refer to themselves personally as Universalist Unitarian. Yet this is more than just pride or nostalgia. It is seen rather as a truer reflection of how Unitarian Universalism has evolved since the merger.

Indeed, the legacy of Universalism’s Origen and the Universalist movement he helped inspire lives on in what are arguably the two most frequently cited of Unitarian Universalism’s seven principles, the first: “The inherent worth and dignity of every person” and the seventh: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Both of which, Richard Trudeau argues, reflect traditional Universalist spirituality. A spirituality which from the start asserted that humans are born into and live their entire lives in a state of dependance (on God to most 18th century people and, at the very least, nature in our own time).

And a spirituality that proclaimed human beings don't have to do anything to earn salvation. "No one is outside the circle of love" as we read together in our responsive reading. Universalists affirmed "the supreme worth of every human personality". Today we use the words "inherent worth and dignity."

Lastly, our Universalist ancestors believed it was in our nature to find fulfillment in doing good. And as Trudeau notes, "It is still true that by our nature we find it deeply fulfilling to do good, and evildoers are still not evil- they just haven't realized that the way to be enduringly happy is to do good." Which affirms the traditional Universalist view of humanity as, "a community of moral equals who are bound together by ties of mutual concern." (Trudeau Universalism 101)

Universalism has indeed changed since it first sparked imagination and hope in the human heart. But still, at its center, is a depth of love at times so incomprehensible it can only be fully embraced by faith. Perhaps then, sometime in the future, maybe even long after I'm gone, someone will pass a barn like that one alongside Route 86 some thirty miles east of Corning, New York and on the side will be painted in large black letters not, "God is Love, but "Love is God."

Amen and Blessed Be